Botanical Garden Collections: Plant Exploration and the "Cultural Politics of Plants"

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PREMISE

The story of international plant exploration and collection is full of fascinating, fantastical tales of daring men endeavoring to bring home some of the most beautiful, exotic plants in the world. When we talk about this history, we need to include what Claudia Swan and Londa Schiebinger call 'colonial botany': the stories of women, of indigenous people, and of the social, economic, and political consequence of the trade. We do not need to silence or erase the delightful and exciting tales of the Tradescants or Joseph Banks, but we do need to give voice to those whose stories we have already silenced and erased. Doing so allows us to grapple with the very present legacy of colonialism and gives us a richer, more thorough understanding of our current and future work as curators of plants and their history.

THE STORIES WE HEAR

'*Rhododendron fortunei*' from Curtis's Bot. Magazine (Above)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Rhododendron_discolor_143-8696.jpg

The typical tale of a European plant explorer often goes something like this: on his way to Shanghai in 1843, Scotsman Robert Fortune, while battling a high fever, singlehandedly fought off a band of Chinese pirates who tried to board his ship. After sailing upriver to Suzhou, Fortune shaved his head, save for a long black braid, and, with help from his local servant, disguised himself in Chinese clothing. He adopted the name Sing-Wah, and after taking a deep breath, began walking towards the city's fabled gardens. Although he wasn't able to eat in public, as his inability to use chopsticks would have revealed his foreign nationality, Fortune eventually found and sent hundreds of Chinese plant specimens back to the Royal Horticultural Society in London, including rhododendrons (above), camellias, and chrysanthemums.

There were many others like Fortune—all European men, it might seem—who evaded stampeding llamas or blood sucking bats in order to send valuable plants back to Europe, and their stories are told in a manner that venerates their adventurous, daring spirit while ignoring their disdain for the lives or laws of the locals.

THE STORIES WE DON'T HEAR

Mary Somerset (right), First Duchess of Beaufort, not only helped fund plant expeditions, but conducted much of the actual research associated with botany in 1690. Somerset studied the available literature and conducted her own research experiments through seeding, propagating, and caring for plant collections sent back to Europe, and though not a member of any academy or royal society, produced carefully crafted catalogues of her collections that provided vital scientific information for botanists around the world. While male explorers like Sir Hans Sloane, John Ray, and Jacob Bobarts relied on her aid and experience, they are the characters featured in the history books, not her.

Somerset and women of the English gentry weren't the only ones to play a crucial part in plant exploration and collection. Jacobus Bontius, a Dutch physician and plant explorer in Indonesia, acknowledged how "Malayan woman practice medicine and midwifery with facility; so…I would prefer to submit myself to such hands than to a half-taught doctor or arrogant surgeon, whose shadow of education was acquired in schools, being inflated with presumption while having no real experience." As has been the case in most historical eras, indigenous women held invaluable knowledge about the uses, locations, and interactions of local plants, and played a vital role for men like Bontius. "Thus it is those who in other things are illiterate have an exact knowledge of herbs and shrubs," he wrote.

"Plants rarely figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life. They are, however, important cultural artifacts, often at the center of political and economic struggles."

-Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan

'Mary, Duchess of Beaufort' by Joseph Nutting (Above Right)
http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw139437/Mary-Duchess-of-Beaufort?LinkID=mp00317&role=sit&rNo=1

'Fieberrindenbaum' (Feverbark Tree) by Franz Eugen Köhler & 'Battle of Majuba Hill' by Richard Caton Woodville II (Right)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5d/Cinchona_calisaya_-_K%C3%B6hler%E2%80%93s_Medizinal-Pflanzen-179.jpg
https://www.britannica.com/list/5-fascinating-battles-of-the-african-colonial-era

THE STORIES WE NEED TO HEAR

Plant exploration and collection has a much darker side that is often glossed over in favor of stories like that of Robert Fortune. The search for the cinchona tree (below) exemplifies this less pleasant, though perhaps more important aspect of this history. Illness, assassination attempts, and natural disasters did not stop the English botanist Richard Spruce from collecting the seeds of the cinchona tree in the Andes. Cinchona bark can be, and had been for centuries, used to treat malaria. The seeds made their way to Java, where Dutch plantations produced enough cinchona to supply Europe with quinine.

While quinine provided relief for millions suffering from malaria, most of the early recipients were European soldiers headed for Africa. The so-called "Scramble for Africa" of the 19th century, in which European powers divided up the entire continent for colonialism, was only made possible by the availability of quinine. The economic, political, and social oppression and exploitation that came from the movement of this plant is a very real part of the history of plant exploration and collection.

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Funding Provided by The American Public Garden Association Student Travel Award, the University of Minnesota Applied Plant Sciences Graduate Student Travel Fund, and the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station